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ABSTRACT

Advanced level French syllabuses of the nine GCE Boards in the United Kingdom are examined. The Southern Universities Joint Board has recently introduced the most radical innovations. As an alternative to its traditional examination it offers Syllabus "B" which dispenses with prescribed tests, but where each student must produce for the Oral Examiner a record of completed reading in French. The Northern Ireland GCE Examinations Board places great importance on the oral. Some perspectives on the teaching of literature are presented. Some competencies required by the parts of the language examination are also identified. (SW)

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ALL ABOVE-BOARD: A COMPARATIVIST LOOKS AT THE ADVANCED LEVEL FRENCH SYLLABUSES OF THE NINE GCE BOARDS

When five years ago I left the chalk face for the educational talk face I was fortunate to be asked to concern myself not only with the methodology of modern language teaching but also with comparative education: thus I have become a comparativist!

I am often asked what comparative education is all about. Instead of offering my usual explanation and justification, I will merely refer to an Ulsterman, a former pupil of mine, who has also taught modern languages in this Province and who has gone on to make some notable contributions in the field of comparative education. His name is Arthur Hearnden. His first book, entitled *Paths to University: Preparation, Assessment, Selection* was one of the Schools Council's research studies, published in 1973. This survey of current practices in France, West Germany, Sweden, USA and USSR adds an extremely helpful comparative dimension to the debate concerning N and F levels.

Arthur Hearnden's later books deal with education in Germany or rather, to the comparativist's special delight, with *Education in the two Germanies,* the title of the book published by Basil Blackwell in 1974. After reading this work (or Dr. Hearnden's own translation, *Bildungspolitik in der BRD und DDR,* published in 1973) most teachers will have been convinced of the value and relevance that comparative education can have for our profession.

In addition to being involved with comparative education, I also have the honour of representing the Northern Ireland GCE Examinations Board as an observer on the Schools Council Modern Languages Advanced Level Examinations Sub-Committee. This body is very much concerned with comparability, and in addition to discussing problems of examining modern languages and, in particular, any syllabus changes proposed by any of the GCE boards, we carry out annual scrutiny exercises in the course of which a number of independent scrutineers look not only at the examination syllabuses, but also at the examination papers, the marking schemes and a representative sample of examination scripts of the various boards. The purpose of this very exhaustive investigation is to ensure the greatest possible degree of comparability between the boards. Having been involved in three such scrutiny exercises, covering between them every board, I am satisfied that at Advanced level the various examining processes are indeed "all above-board".

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Of course, there is no such thing as a perfect examination, and in our detailed reports we usually make a number of, I hope, constructive recommendations which are then discussed with the chief examiners. Whatever the differences in syllabus content or examination structure, every board is equally committed to providing an examination that is absolutely fair and of the appropriate standard. You would not wish me to divulge any of the marking schemes (or would you?!), but I can assure you that among all the variations on a common theme I have discovered nothing sinister or "hidden". If, with the benefit of the insight I have gained, I were to return to classroom teaching–and this would be no bad idea for any member of an education department–I would mark my pupils' school examinations in exactly the same way as I always did it.

return to classroom teaching–and this would mark my pupils' school examinations in exactly the same way as I always did it.

Even if detailed marking schemes are not made public, a good deal of interesting information may be gleaned from the syllabuses published by the various boards. I have in front of me the 1979 Advanced Level French syllabuses of the seven English boards and the 1978 syllabus of the Welsh Joint Education Committee. If you are really curious about such mundane and mercenary matters as marking schemes, I would refer you to the Joint Matriculation Board. On page 176 you will learn that Paper I (3 hours) will be marked as follows:

> "A. Translation into French (about 250 words in length). (14 per cent of total marks)
>
> (If a working total of 120 is assumed, the examiners will normally deduct one mark for each error up to a maximum for each section determined according to length and difficulty. Smaller deductions (e.g. some accents) and larger deductions (e.g. gross grammatical errors) are also made where appropriate. Repeated and consequential errors are not normally penalised. Outstandingly good renderings can earn bonus marks.)
>
> B. Free composition in French of about 300 words. (16 per cent of total marks)
>
> (If a working total of 30 marks is assumed, 12 marks will be allotted for grammatical accuracy and 18 for content, arrangement, stylistic qualities, breadth of vocabulary and idiom.)"

It is perhaps worth noting that the Advanced Level German examination of the same board is structured rather differently and that, partly as a consequence of this, the marking scheme is also rather different.

Incidentally the JMB Regulations and Syllabuses are particularly interesting for the Ordinary Level teacher as they include a comprehensive list of oral questions in the various languages as well as, in the case of Spanish, a list of grammatical content and, published in a separate leaflet, a list of active vocabulary relevant to the syllabus. For Russian, too, there is a list of word forms and structures.

Much more useful, however, than an acquaintance with the computation of marks, is an indication of the purpose of each part of the examination, and here the University of London provides really helpful guidelines for both teachers and pupils. I quote from pages 230–232:

Paper 1 (Prescribed Texts)

"The candidate will be expected to show evidence that he has read the texts in French. Answers should be written in essay-form and be strictly relevant, adequate in scope, properly documented, logically planned and clearly expressed.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the candidate's detailed knowledge and understanding of selected texts in relation to the terms of the questions set."

Paper 2 (Essay in French)

"The essay should give evidence of accurate grammar and syntax, apt and varied vocabulary, and appropriate French idiom. The content must be relevant to the terms of the topic chosen and the argument should be logically planned, properly developed and fully illustrated.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the candidate's ability to express himself in written French with accuracy, clarity and fluency."

Paper 3 (Translation into French)

"The purpose of this paper is to assess the candidate's ability to write accurate and idiomatic French within defined limits."

Paper 4 (Translation from French)

"The purpose of this paper is to assess the candidate's understanding of written French and his ability to convey carefully and naturally in English the substance and style of the original passages."

Paper 5 (Dictation)

"The purpose of the Dictation is to assess the candidate's ability to link the spoken and the written word: it is a composite test of his comprehension and his precise knowledge of French sounds, spelling and grammar."

Paper 6 (Oral)

"The purpose of the oral is to test the candidate's ability to express himself in the spoken language. The candidate will be expected to show that his command of the spoken language is accurate as well as reasonably fluent."

If you are attracted by the "topic" approach, then the Associated Examining Board will cater for your needs. The three prescribed topics for 1979 are "Childhood and Youth in France", "The Cinema in France since 1945" and "Bretagne". If candidates choose only one of these topics, they will have to answer in addition four questions on prescribed books which are related to the topics; if two topics are chosen, then only three questions on related prescribed texts are to be answered. The Board lists a considerable number of books for each topic which "teachers and candidates may find ... useful". It seems to me that in this context "useful" is quite an understatement!

The Cambridge (Local Examinations) Syndicate differentiates between books "for detailed study" and others "for less detailed study", but I understand the Syndicate intends to end this differentiation.

The syllabus of the Oxford Delegacy is interesting because as an alternative to prose composition it offers a "précis composition". This consists of "an extended passage, in English, about three times the normal length of a prose composition (i.e. about 600 words), to be summarized in French in approximately 200 words; a choice of two passages is provided". Candidates are also given the choice of either translating two passages from French or of doing only one unprepared translation together with a "précis translation" which involves "an extended passage in French, about three times the normal length of an unseen (i.e. about 600–650 words) to be summarized in English in about 200 words".

The Oxford and Cambridge Board's syllabus sounds rather laconic, even though it boasts of both a reading comprehension and a listening comprehension test.

It is the smallest board, the Southern Universities Joint Board, that has recently introduced the most radical innovations. As an alternative to its traditional examination it offers Syllabus B which dispenses with prescribed texts, but where "each student must produce for the Oral Examiner a record of completed reading in French" 20% of the total marks are allocated to a topic which "is to be directly related to France, French and/or French dependencies. It is to be a detailed study of about 3000 words in length, written in English or French, with illustrations if relevant". The syllabus also states that for the "unseen" paper "a knowledge of France and current events may well be an advantage in understanding the passages". The composition paper will consist of an essay and "an exercise requiring an extended answer or two shorter answers to questions of the following types:

> a report based on various given sources of information and facts; some statistics may be included;
>
> a continuation in the form of a reply or counter arguments to a passage given in French".

The oral examination is innovatory, too, as indicated by the following information:

> (a) Reading–15 minutes preparation time allowed during which a monolingual dictionary will be available. Candidates will be expected to discuss the ideas in the text.
>
> (b) General conversation–with reference to the reading done during the two year course and discussion of the project."

I cannot select any highlights from the syllabus of the Welsh Joint Education Committee as I have not been able to obtain the 1979 syllabus, but presumably it will continue to state, as in 1978, that in the oral examination "special stress will be laid on distinct enunciation and good intonation".

This commendable precept leads me to a consideration of the relative importance of the oral examination. Although it is not always easy to discover the exact allocation of marks, I am certain that, with the exception of Syllabus B of the Southern Universities Joint Board, no other board places as much emphasis on the oral as does the Northern Ireland GCE Examinations Board. I am delighted that in this respect we are in the vanguard because I believe it is important that we should attach great importance to meaningful reading and fluent conversation.

The value of the dictation is perhaps more debatable, certainly in languages such as Spanish and German. But even in French, three of the boards (AEB, JMB and Oxford) have abandoned dictations. JMB, Oxford, Oxford and Cambridge and SUJB Syllabus B have listening or aural comprehension tests, the latter two boards, however, retaining the dictation.

If Northern Ireland allocates a greater proportion of marks to the oral, it need not surprise us that our literature paper (and that of JMB) carry fewer marks than those of other boards. I personally think that we have got the weighting about right. I should, however, be very sorry indeed to see the demise of the literature paper, as advocated in some quarters. One working paper states: "The value of literary study was strongly defended by some, but many accepted that it had little interest for many students or potential students. The point was made that literature is often very badly taught and that the way it is treated by the boards encourages bad teaching."

Would I be rash to claim that our Board, for one, does *not* encourage bad teaching, and that even if it did, teachers would have it in their power to prevent such an undesirable effect? Credit where credit is due: Beechill House takes due note of the recommendations of teacher representatives. It is up to practising

teachers to select suitable texts, and certainly in French (and German) there is no shortage of these. It is not necessary to be an accredited representative: any teacher can send his suggestions for texts to be prescribed to the convener of the relevant panel and, speaking for the German panel, we should be only too pleased to consider very carefully any titles that are put forward.

If a teacher feels that the questions set on the prescribed texts "encourage bad teaching", then he ought to express his dissatisfaction in writing and let the appropriate language panel and, indeed, the chief examiner, have the benefit of his views. The teacher's criticism may or may not be valid, but once it has been voiced it ought to be and, I am sure, will be noted.

Even if the selection of prescribed texts and the questions asked on them are acceptable, there remains the possibility "that literature is often very badly taught". The problem of teaching literature—some would even question whether it can be taught—is a fascinating one, possibly for some future meeting. Today I would merely venture the opinion that some of us are so conditioned by the literary training we have had at the university that we tend to pass it on, without much modification, to our pupils, forgetting that—as far as literature is concerned—they are necessarily much less experienced and mature than when we were students at the university. To select prescribed texts for one's class because one has excellent lecture notes seems to me to be a recipe for potential disaster. A much more promising approach is to have a completely fresh look at the text, trying to see it through the eyes of our pupils, and not to encumber it with a great deal of literary history and background information.

Thus in my view it is entirely feasible to interest pupils in *L'Etranger* and to elicit from them valid and valuable reactions without giving them a learned discourse on existentialism. At the risk of sounding boastful, this was how I approached the work, and the candidates do not seem to have suffered from this apparent neglect: in 1969—admittedly a vintage year—in a class of nineteen, fifteen obtained grade A and the remaining four were awarded grade B. Among the other works we read was *Chronique du Règne de Charles IX*. The pupils were "deprived" of any lectures on Mérimée, but, sadly, because of the chronicle of our own times, they did not require much background teaching in order to appreciate this work. The same pupils were given no notes on the history of French poetry or on Molière or on Jules Romains, but I like to think that most of them did react, as individuals, to the selected poems in the *Oxford Book of French Verse*, *Le Malade Imaginaire* and its modern counterpart, *Knock*.

As a footnote to the class of 1969 I must add that it was the only time that the timetable allowed us to "stream" the fifty-four Advanced Level candidates, with the pleasing result that the pupils in the other two classes also fared very creditably. If we had gone in for mixed-ability teaching, concerning which—you may recall from

our last meeting–I have mixed feelings, I have no doubt that the results would have been less satisfactory, both for the most and the least able.

Some teachers are advocating an Advanced Level examination in language only, and some boards are looking into this possibility. I do not favour such an alternative, not only because it would be a great pity to abandon the study of literature, but also because, to quote a working paper, "inevitably a higher level of competence would be expected and a wider range of linguistic skills would be practised". Such an ambitious target seems to me unrealistic.

Even under our present dispensation a good linguist can obtain a perfectly respectable grade with low marks for Paper III. Very wisely there is no hurdle as far as that part of the examination is concerned, whereas–again very wisely–the Northern Ireland states that "candidates will be required to satisfy the examiner in Papers I and II taken together and in the oral test". Apart from the Southern Universities Joint Board we are the only board to include this stipulation, and I think we may well pat ourselves on the back for such a sensible policy.

Indeed, it is my sincere belief that we are very fortunate with our Board. 1977 was Jubilee Year also for the Advanced Level examination, and it is only right to give credit also to the then Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland which was responsible for the new venture until the present Board was established. In Northern Ireland we benefit from the close liaison that exists between the Board and the teachers. If this Association can help to promote even closer links and better understanding between all those concerned with the teaching of modern languages it will fulfil a very valuable role. Certainly today's gathering of representatives from all the different branches of education promises well for future cooperation.

Whatever the future holds in store for the teacher of modern languages–and we are going to hear a great deal about N and F examinations which may, in about ten years, replace our Advanced Levels–it is reassuring that the official proposals refer to "a confidence built up slowly between examiners and the consensus of teachers they consult and serve". I like this reference to confidence, and I approve of the relationship between examiners and teachers.

ROBERT WEIL
Q.U.B.